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ABSTRACT

This article suggests that to better prepare students for the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) oral proficiency interview, it is up to instructors to see that these students are better prepared in oral, creative speech. Bridging exercises between dialogue memorization and personalized situations can be used to help students internalize the language of dialogue. The scripted situation is a simple bridging exercise that presents dialogue, line by line, on two cards that students work through in pairs. Although scripted text exercises do not lend themselves well to grading, they are excellent sources for detection of pronunciation problems and intonational errors. These cards can draw timid students from their attachment to a memorized text and can serve as prompts for student performance-based evaluations. The scripted situations are written in English and can be easily developed on 3x5 cards or on a computer page. Over time, scripting instructions can be reduced until only the Russian word and a few English words will set the situation and expected dialogue. (Contains seven references.) (NAV)

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Novice Situation Cards: The Scripted Situation

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The Communicative Classroom

This month's contribution to "The Communicative Classroom" comes from Professor Nathan Longan of Oakland University. Longan describes the use of situations or role plays based on dialogues in the novice-level classroom as a means to provide students with a gradual transition from dependence on memorized formula to autonomous language production. Although the activities described below are for the university-level Russian-language classroom, they could easily be implemented in a high school or middle school Russian class or in any Slavic language classroom at any level. The editor encourages submissions from pre-college teachers, graduate student teaching assistants, as well as college and university instructors, not only for the Russian-language classroom, but also for classes in other Slavic languages. See the December 1994 issue of the *AATSEEL Newsletter* for submission guidelines and send submissions to Benjamin Rifkin, Slavic Dept., 720 Van Hise Hall, 1220 Linden Drive, University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI 53706.

Novice Situation Cards: The Scripted Situation

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Those familiar with the protocol of the ACTFL oral proficiency interview know that the "situation card" is usually considered a critical element in the solicitation of a ratable sample. While the interview "rules of the game" insist that the card can function either as a level check or a probe, experience suggests that, except for the Superior speaker, the situation card is often as a probe used to "prove" insufficient proficiency of an Intermediate speaker for an Advanced rating or the same of an Advanced speaker for a Superior rating. A situation card for a Novice level interview must be, virtually by definition, a probe, and this point is underscored by the fact that there are no "Novice" situation cards in the OPI tester's bag of tricks that might be used as level checks. By their very nature, "probes" are used to take an interview candidate beyond their highest level. In other words, probes should force linguistic breakdown, and thus are perceived by candidates as points of "failure." Probing with situations in OPIs, then can impart a patina of failure that becomes associated with situations in general, especially on the part of teachers who use OPIs with situations as part of their program assessment. For the classroom committed to communicative competence, the "situation" must take on a less "negative" role, not a measure of what one cannot do, but an exercise in what one can do (here we mean of course only the oral modality, speaking). Since a large percentage of all Russian students are novice speakers, then, it behooves us to ensure that they receive sufficient and appropriately indexed practice with the skills that will finally pull them into the Intermediate level where creative speech is a byword.

A command of common speech formulas is a crucial building block in the foundation of creative speech, and most elementary Russian texts recognize this by employing dialogues as a central part of each lesson. However, "memorizing the dialogues" and "command of common speech formulas" are not the same. Somehow students need to span the breach between dry, flat, lifeless reproductions of "The Dialogue" (which can hardly be called "command") and personal "real" control of the elements found in "The Dialogue." Until then the "language" that a student can reproduce will remain of unconvincing communicative quality. This commonplace, that memorized recitation is unconvincing, is worth repeating because the verbatim rendition of a dialogue is all too often what the student believes is expected. Situations are, of course, an excellent exercise to mark the right side of this "memorized-personalized" dichotomy, and some texts offer explicit sections in each chapter for role playing; those that don't (Clark, for instance) probably should have them supplied by the teacher. These sections are usually a final "crowning" oral exercise meant to pull students into more "creative" language use.

The effectiveness of this sort of activity has been shown in numerous studies and is described in some detail in Nunan. For instance, Nunan cites three "gap" type activities (from Prabhun, Clark and Pattison) intended to "stimulate interactive language use": information-gap, reasoning-gap and opinion gap (Nunan, 64-66). One or both students in a paired situation lack information (the gap) and the task is to use language to get the needed information, i.e. close the gap. Most of these exercises, of course, presuppose some language already, and so the activities lend themselves best either to closing exercises or to classrooms of strong novice if not intermediate speakers.

For the elementary Russian teacher whose classes are likely full of novice speakers, however, the "information gap" is often of a more basic sort. "Bridging exercises" between dialogue memorization and personalized situations help students to internalize the language of "The Dialogue." Without such bridging exercises, the princes (and princesses) of Serendip that can "discover" the new language tools and make them their own are few and far between, and most students, for lack of a better choice, will opt for the word-for-word "alternative." Russian's status as a Group Three language, according to the Foreign Service Institute's calculation of expected levels of speaking proficiency (discussed in Omaggio-Hadley, p. 28) is well deserved. A lack of calques, a plethora of complicated sounds, and a whole arsenal of morphological land mines all mean that in Russian even the introduction of simple dialogues is a multifaceted and difficult project. Without good opening activities, getting to successful closure is unlikely. Robin,

Robin and Henry's textbook, *Golosa*, for example, provides some excellent bridging exercises, but teachers should consider designing their own bridging exercises to supplement the ones in *Golosa* or to provide them for students using textbooks which do not offer any such exercises.

One of the simplest of these "bridging" exercises is what might be called the scripted situation. Instead of the essence of the task being narrated on one card for a pair of students to work from, the dialogues are broken down line by line and presented on two cards. A typical lesson including a "scripted situation" exercise would be implemented the first full day dialogues are introduced in class. Students begin with a warm-up oral exercise centered on a given dialogue; Rifkin (1995) has suggested the students work together in groups consisting of all of the "a" players or "b" players before each "run-through" with their counterparts. Students then break up into pairs and each student receives a card. The cards are marked, for instance, 2.1a and 2.1b, 2.2a and 2.2b, and so forth to indicate the lesson (2), the dialogue (.1 or .2) and the pairing of students (a or b). Each card features the dialogue rendered in narrative form for one of the speakers. The students then work through the dialogue line by line with the text (if they need it) for, say, ten minutes. Then they practice with only one of the pair allowed to look at the text, then without the text altogether (another 15-20). During the pair work the instructor circulates through the room and notes points of special difficulty that serve as the basis for warm-down exercises to conclude class.

The next day of dialogue work can start with these cards as a warm-up exercise. Scripted situations are not meant to replace the "creative" exercises at the end of a unit (the last steps on the bridge across to closure), but rather they serve as a first step. In terms of Rivers' distinction between "skill-getting" activities and "skill-using" activities, scripted situations are much more the former than the latter, and accuracy is of the essence here, especially phonetic accuracy, since, as Rifkin (1991) has pointed out, "'skill-getting' activities are focused on accuracy in one or another aspect of production." However the degree of the "scripting" of these situations can be gradually reduced day by day as the students demonstrate greater and greater mastery of the language material so that by the end of the period of instruction, the situations can be "unscripted" and the activity can be considered a "skill-using" task (according to Rivers' definition, p. 42), focused more on fluency than on accuracy.

As a first step, scripted situations do not lend themselves well to "grading," but rather the teacher should use this time to draw the attention of individual students to special pronunciation problems and intonational errors. Students need to be encouraged to use the text as little as possible when working through a scripted situation, but this is more of a weaning device than a testing one. In a classroom where dialogues are assigned for mastery (so as not to use the other "M" word, 'memorization'), scripted situation cards can be used to draw timid students from a vicious attachment to a memorized text; for other students the cards provide a helpful prompt in the midst of a tense performance based evaluation. Still, if the scripted situations become too closely associated with test situations they can become an object of fear rather than a tool for consolidation. Since they are in English and follow dialogues closely, scripted situations like these are not terribly time-consuming to produce. On a word processor with a fast dot-matrix printer they can be written up and printed in a matter of minutes. Real 3x5 "cards" aren't a requirement— two to four scripts will fit on an 8.5x11 piece of paper that can be quickly cut. Below is an example of the scripted situation for two of the dialogues for Lesson Two of *Golosa*.

2.1A: **РУССКИЙ**

1. You are meeting a friend at the airport. Welcome them, ask how they are. Ask where their suitcase is.
2. Exclaim how big, or little or pretty or good or bad or ugly or new or old it is. Ask what they have in the suitcase. Ask if they have any electronic stuff.
3. When you hear the words "presents," ask what kind.
4. When you find out that the presents are a surprise, tell your friend that you have a surprise too.
5. Tell them you have a new car.

2.1B: **АМЕРИКАНЕЦ**

1. You're being met at the airport. Answer the question about the suitcase.
2. Answer in the affirmative that you have some electronic stuff. Name a couple of things (camera & tape player for instance). Say you have some presents.
3. Say your presents are a surprise.
4. Ask what kind of surprise your friend has.
5. Ask if the car is a Zhiguli.

2.2A: **РУССКАЯ**

1. You are meeting a friend at the airport. Welcome them, ask how they are.
2. Ask if that suitcase is theirs. Exclaim how big, or little or pretty or good or bad or ugly or new or old it is.
3. When you hear the words "presents" your curiosity is piqued, ask what kind.
4. Praise your friend.

2.2B: АМЕРИКАНКА

1. You're being met at the airport. Answer that you are fine. Say hello.
2. Answer that another one is also yours. Say that in one you have only clothes, and that in the other one there are cassettes, a camera and gifts.
3. Say you have some American magazines and books.

These situations can be revised to provide more focus on creative use of the language (as described above) as demonstrated in the following examples:

2.3A: РУССКИЙ

Meet a friend at the airport.

2.3B: АМЕРИКАНЕЦ

You're just arrived at the airport in Moscow where your friend (for whom you've brought presents) will meet you.

These later situations, which feature less "scripting," provide students with opportunities to use the language creatively and invest their speech with their own personal meanings, a key feature of the "skill-using" activity. The gradual reduction of "scripting" over a short period of time in each unit of instruction helps students move towards autonomy of speech in a gradual manner. It is precisely this kind of activity which helps develop students' fluency of speech.

For textbooks in which formulae are presented in other than dialogue form (Alexander Lipson's rituals come to mind), the scripted dialogue might be less appropriate. Otherwise, scripted situations, with varying degrees of scripting, can be made for any textbook with dialogues, and they provide a simple, convenient and fun way out of the textbook, from memorization to mastery.

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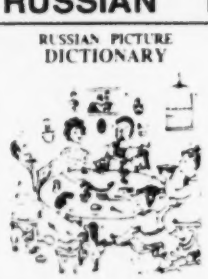

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